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## Original Article

# ‘Giving Children a Better Life?’ Reconsidering Social Reproduction, Humanitarianism and Development in Intercountry Adoption

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**Abstract** This article takes a political economy approach to intercountry adoption (ICA) as a global system to consider how children’s well-being is often at the center of essential development questions in sometimes contradictory ways that are masked by the depoliticizing sentimentality applied to children. A reconsideration of ICA as social reproduction rather than child rescue also decenters development studies’ tendency to reduce development to problems in the global South. Instead, I highlight how ICA as an ostensibly humanitarian intervention also has much to do with crises of social reproduction in the global North. It is therefore important for development studies to critically question underlying assumptions and practices in discourses about ‘giving children a better life’.

Cet article aborde l’adoption internationale (AI) – considérée comme un système mondial – dans une approche d’économie politique pour examiner en quoi le bien-être des enfants est souvent placé au cœur des questions-clés de développement de manières parfois contradictoires et masquées par la sentimentalité dépolitisante appliquée aux enfants. De plus, envisager l’adoption internationale dans le cadre de la reproduction sociale plutôt que du secours aux enfants déplace de sa position centrale la tendance des études de développement à réduire le développement à des problèmes touchant les pays du Sud. Comme je le souligne, l’adoption internationale, cette intervention soi-disant humanitaire, est étroitement liée aux crises de la reproduction sociale dans les pays du Nord. Il est donc important que les études de développement remettent en question les hypothèses et pratiques sous-jacentes aux discours sur le thème « offrir une vie meilleure aux enfants ».

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Following their 2012 conference in Addis Ababa, The African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) published a report called *Africa: The New Frontier for Intercountry Adoption*. The preface critically frames intercountry adoption (ICA) as, borrowing from Jena Martin, ‘modern-day imperialism, allowing dominant, developed cultures to strip away a developing country’s most precious resources, its children’ (ACPF, 2012a, p. vi).

It is telling that the ACPF chose to use a quote that describes a developing country’s children as extractive resources to imperialist developed countries, contradicting the predominantly Western discourses of adoption as child rescue (Davies, 2011). The fact that Africa is indeed the latest wave in the shifting frontier of ICA – ICAs from Africa having tripled in the last decade, despite a worldwide decline (ACPF, 2012a) – reflects a pattern of global marketization of the adoption industry, and therefore of a commodification of children. Here, I reconsider ICA discourses about ‘giving children a better life’ by arguing that they mask both ICA’s market dynamics and the crises of social reproduction on the ‘demand’ side that precipitate ICA. It is

thus worth critically re-examining ICA in relation to humanitarianism and development discourses.

Though rarely examined in this light, ICA is an example of how children's well-being is often at the center of essential development questions in sometimes contradictory ways that are masked by the depoliticizing sentimentality applied to children. Studying the global political economy of ICA can thus enhance our critical understandings of children's complex roles within larger international development questions, especially as they pertain to questions of social reproduction and assumptions about what constitutes 'a better life' for children. A reconsideration of ICA as social reproduction rather than child rescue also decenters development studies' tendency to reduce development to problems in the global South. Instead, I highlight how ICA as an ostensibly humanitarian intervention also has much to do with crises of social reproduction in the global North.<sup>1</sup>

While there is a diversity of individual experiences of ICA, this article approaches ICA as a global system whose operation is critically examined from a political-economic development studies perspective. After providing an overview of key concepts, I detail ICA's development into a market industry driven by crises of social reproduction. I then show how this commodification is often masked by the sentimentalization of children and discourses about child rescue common to ICA, humanitarianism and development aid. Rhetoric about 'giving children a better life' thus drives both demand for adoption and relinquishment of children by poor families. I go on to discuss how ICA therefore becomes imbricated in development trajectories, particularly as they relate to social reproduction over space and time. Despite its humanitarian claims, then, ICA ultimately perpetuates global inequality, solving some crises of social reproduction while creating or exacerbating others.

## Key Concepts

*Social reproduction* deals broadly with the mechanisms by which societies are able to perpetuate themselves. Initially, development studies scholars' largely Marxist approach to social reproduction took the commodification of wage labor in capitalist systems as its main object of analysis (Dickinson and Russell, 1986, p. 1), but this excluded family and household. By arguing that narrow attention to labor markets as sites of social reproduction effectively overlooked consideration of women's work, most notably their essential role in biological reproduction but also their labor within household and informal (or unacknowledged) economies, feminist political-economists 'turned towards a critical appropriation of political economy in order to highlight the "hidden connections between household structures, the position of women and the reproduction of capitalist social relations"' (Dickinson and Russell, 1986, p. 4). They thereby called attention to the essential role of the family (or 'the household') in social reproduction and modernization theory, revealing how '... the family and the state become important sites where the needs of reproduction are linked to the need for accumulation and where the state intervenes to offset or offload the high costs of social reproduction onto or away from the family at different moments in different locales' (Bakker and Silvey, 2008, p. 3), thus laying effective groundwork for opening development studies to more inclusive approaches to political economy and social reproduction.

Scholars of new childhood studies have similarly argued for a political economic approach to understanding children's central roles in social reproduction and national development (Oldman, 1994; Katz, 2004; Cheney, 2007). In an era of globalization and neoliberalization of capitalist production, the state has retreated from provisioning for social reproduction in favor of its privatization, often with particularly deleterious effects for children (Katz, 2004; Brennan *et al*, 2012).

The term *neoliberalism* is used broadly here to encompass the cultural effects of capitalist social and economic policies that have reduced the efficacy of the welfare state but in which people are still expected to embody certain market-rationalized, hetero-normative, reproductive family models (Duggan *et al*, 2013). Because children are often figured as the emotional center of families (Stryker, 2010, p. 39), considering the social construction of adoption in relation to broader social contexts and international regimes of power may likewise offer development studies a fresh perspective on the importance of intergenerational relationships and the role of children – as social capital, commodities, actors and laborers in social reproduction. This in turn advances a more critical, holistic theory of social reproduction in international development.

### **Adoption’s Shifting Frontier: Child ‘Saving’, Humanitarianism, and Supply and Demand**

Modern adoption has long been framed as a humanitarian practice, but it also has roots in social engineering. British policy from the 1870s to the 1960s advocated moving orphaned children to the colonies as a means of social reform (Murdoch, 2006). Similar concerns with ‘wayward’ children in East Coast US cities prompted the missionary Children’s Aid Society’s (CSA) ‘Orphan Trains’: from 1854 to 1929, up to 250 000 children were sent to the Western frontier. Though most of these ‘orphans’ had at least one living parent (25 per cent had two), CSA founder Charles Brace believed that they would have ‘a better life’ with ‘good Christian families’ than in the immigrant slums of New York. He ‘dismissed contemptuously those [birth]parents who stood in the way of what he thought were a child’s best interests, including the removal of the child to a “better” home’ (O’Connor, 2004, p. 76). His motives were not merely charitable, though: Brace argued that children had to be removed from poor urban communities lest they become ‘the great lower class of our city’, overwhelming the middle classes with both criminal and political influence (Joyce, 2013, p. 46).

At each stop of the Orphan Trains, children were displayed on station platforms (hence the phrase ‘put up for adoption’) for frontier families looking to expand but also to work the land (O’Connor, 2004). Thus, while children were ostensibly being ‘saved’, both in the religious sense and from ‘the dangerous classes’ (Brace, 1872) in a charitable act of adoption, they were also being removed from urban families and recruited as agricultural laborers on America’s booming frontier.

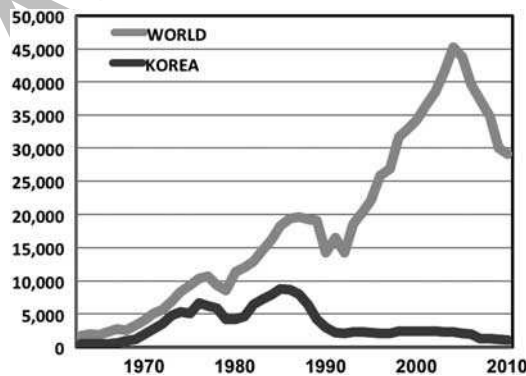
Similar discourses of child rescue pervade ICA practices. ICA began in earnest in the wake of World War II (Lovelock, 2000) to shelter children who had lost their parents to difficult or dangerous circumstances. The end of the Korean War brought the first significant wave of internationally adopted children from Korea to the United States, often at the behest of US evangelical Christians (Marre and Briggs, 2009, p. 8). Holt International Children’s Services, the United States’ largest adoption agency, was founded by a missionary couple who was moved by a World Vision documentary about ‘Amerasian’ babies, the shunned progeny of US or British soldiers and Korean women. They adopted eight Korean children and campaigned for other Christians to rescue others ‘... from the cold and misery and darkness of Korea ...’ ([pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/people/holt.htm](http://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/people/holt.htm)), setting off a wave of approximately 200 000 adoptions from South Korea and a precedent for international adoptions from other countries.

Various campaigns for ICA, then and now, contain a ‘visual iconography of rescue’ (Briggs, 2003). Many ‘Amerasian’ children were likewise evacuated from Vietnam to the United States in the 1975 Operation Babylift (Bergquist, 2009). During this period, many native Australian and North American children were also taken from their homes and placed with white families under

state poverty alleviation strategies that some argue amounted to sociocide (Dubinsky, 2010). In the 1970s and 1980s, children were placed in international adoption through maneuvers of Cold War politics (for example, Operation Pedro Pan in Cuba) and various ‘dirty wars’ in Latin America (Marre and Briggs, 2009, pp. 10–11). Throughout, discourses of child rescue in ICA have been linked with various civilizing missions, implicit or explicit.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the social importance of having children during the Baby Boom drove infertile couples to adopt (Joyce, 2013, p. 91). Until the 1940s, homes for unwed mothers had taught women parenting skills in preparation for keeping their babies. However, from 1940 to 1970, in an era known as the Baby Scoop, social programs pathologized unwed mothers and pressed them to relinquish their babies for adoption by married couples ‘in the child’s best interests’ (babyscoopera.com/adoption-abuse-of-mothers/). Non-relative adoptions rose from an estimated 50 000 in 1944 to 175 000 in 1970 (pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/archive/MazaAT.htm). Though legalization of abortion in 1973 is credited with ending the Baby Scoop, religious organizations and lawmakers mobilized to establish federally funded crisis pregnancy centers – often adjacent to abortion clinics – to urge women with unplanned pregnancies to consider adoption instead of abortion (Joyce, 2013, p. 100). Despite these efforts, the percentage of single mothers relinquishing infants dropped from 80 per cent in 1970 to 4 per cent in 1983 (Brodzinsky, 1994, p. 297). That percentage then dropped to 1 per cent between 1989 and 1995 (www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad306.pdf). By 1988, there were an estimated 3.3 US adoption seekers for every actual domestic adoption (statistics.adoption.com/information/adoption-statistics-hoping-to-adopt.html), and that number has only climbed due to infertility rates and delayed parenthood by working women (Roby and Ife, 2009, p. 662). The plummeting domestic supply of healthy babies for adoption in the United States and Europe precipitated a demand for foreign adoptions. Figure 1 shows that ICAs thus increased dramatically during this same period.

Demographer Peter Selman has traced the movement of a million children through ICA, the majority from South Korea and China to the United States and Europe (Selman, 2013b). Selman estimates the total number of ICAs from 1950 to 1970 at 140 000. In the 1980s, when domestic supply waned, ICAs jumped to about 180 000 (Kane, 1993). Despite a drop in South Korean ICAs due to rising domestic adoption, ICA increased and diversified in the 1990s (Figure 1). As slowing population growth and aging combined with factors detailed above prompted a ‘baby famine’ in the global North, the population increased and grew younger in the global South,



**Figure 1:** Intercountry adoption 1963–2010 (Selman, 2013b – Figures based on official government estimates).

where people under 15 years of age have come to represent one-third (and half in sub-Saharan Africa) of a burgeoning population (Fussell and Greene, 2002, p. 22).

These demographic trends also coincided with the rise of neoliberal economic policies that were introduced in the 1980s and exported to developing countries in the form of structural adjustment – but which also became social policy in the United States through the reduction of the welfare state. The net result has been a shift of resources away from poor people and countries to wealthy ones (Duggan *et al*, 2013). Children also tend to circulate from poorer to wealthier countries in ICA. Since 2000, there have been an estimated 450 000 international adoptions (Selman, 2013b). The United States accounts for nearly half (47 per cent) of all ICAs, with Western European countries contributing significantly (*ibid.*).

Table 1 shows top countries of origin in the last decade, including China, Russia, Guatemala and South Korea – but Ethiopia has recently soared up the list, with over 21 000 ICAs from 2004 to 2010 (ACPF, 2012a, p. 6). Ethiopia became the first African country to break into the top ten sending countries in 2004 with 1527 ICAs (nearly twice that of 2003). By 2009, Ethiopia had surpassed second-place Russia in real numbers, with 4564 ICAs. In 2011, only China was higher with 4418 ICAs to Ethiopia’s 3456 – though these numbers represent 1.7/1000 live births in Ethiopia versus 0.27/1000 in China (Selman, 2013a).

Modern-day ICA continues to serve as a corrective to disastrous social and political upheavals in sending countries. New frontiers in ICA opened up around the fall of Communist regimes, from China to Romania (Marre and Briggs, 2009, pp. 12–13), and ICAs in Haiti spiked in response to perceived urgent childcare needs following the 2010 earthquake, from their previous high in 2009 of 4.5 ICAs per 1000 live births to 9.8 ICAs per 1000 live births in 2010.<sup>2</sup> While global media coverage has brought awareness of such crises to potential adopters (Cartwright, 2005; Hoffman, 2012), the Internet has facilitated networking of potential transnational adoptive parents with agencies, orphanages and other facilitators around the world (Marre and Briggs, 2009, p. 13).

## ICA in the International Marketplace

The above-mentioned patterns may accommodate explanations of ICA as a humanitarian act, but they do not tell the whole story: uneven supply and demand has in fact yielded a highly lucrative adoption industry (Dickens, 2009, pp. 600–601; Smolin, 2010). Each ICA costs approximately US\$15 000–35 000 (Smolin, 2007, p. 445) in agency fees, dossier processing,

**Table 1:** Ranking of top 10 ICA countries of origin, 2003–2011 (Selman, 2013a)

Rank	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2003–2011
1	China	China	China	China	China	China
2	Russia	Russia	Russia	Ethiopia	Ethiopia	Russia
3	Guatemala	Guatemala	Guatemala	Russia	Russia	Ethiopia
4	South Korea	South Korea	Ethiopia	Vietnam	Colombia	Guatemala
5	Ukraine	Ukraine	Vietnam	Ukraine	Ukraine	South Korea
6	Colombia	Ethiopia	Colombia	South Korea	South Korea	Colombia
7	India	Colombia	Ukraine	Colombia	Vietnam	Ukraine
8	Haiti	Vietnam	South Korea	Haiti	India	Vietnam
9	Vietnam	Haiti	India	India	Philippines	Haiti
10	Kazakhstan	India	Haiti	Kazakhstan	Brazil	India

court costs, immigration fees, travel and childcare. Adoption agencies in the US post profits in the millions, with directors earning upwards of \$250 000/year (Siegal, 2011, p. 41). To maximize profits, agency directors establish relationships with local orphanages in countries where children are plentiful but adoption laws are lax. Many orphanages demand ‘mandatory donations’ of about \$3500 from foreign adoptive parents (Smolin, 2007, p. 446), also making it lucrative for multiple adoption intermediaries in sending countries. At the height of Guatemala’s adoption boom in the early 2000s, for example, private lawyers were earning \$15–20 000 per adoption (Smolin, 2010, p. 468), prompting widespread pressuring of poor parents to relinquish their children for ICA, and even kidnapping and trafficking (cf. Siegal, 2011). ‘Orphans’ are ‘created’ by ICA brokers who then forge their paperwork to claim the parents died or abandoned the child in a move Smolin (2010) has termed ‘child laundering’. When such abuses ultimately led to a moratorium on ICAs from Guatemala, the pattern repeated itself in Ethiopia (Bartholet and Smolin, 2012; Bunkers *et al.*, 2012).

Though many countries of origin restrict ICA to special needs children and those whose parents are dead or untraceable, some countries, particularly in Africa, have recently begun citing poverty as their reason for opening to ICA (ACPF, 2012a, pp. 20–21). This is seen most often in the early stages of a country’s acquiescence to ICA, when national adoption laws are non-specific or even non-existent, as has been the case in Ethiopia (Bunkers *et al.*, 2012), or where adoption law is easily circumvented, as in Uganda.<sup>3</sup> Despite – and even because of – regulation, the demand for ICA drives the market toward less regulated countries, or as Dickens (2009) writes, ‘where there are favourable cultural traditions and legal provisions, and a reliable supply chain’ (p. 600), especially of healthy infants who are in high demand and thus fetch higher fees. For example, Table 2 shows one US agency’s fee schedule for Ethiopia, a sliding scale based on age and health, in which adopting a child 0–5 years old costs most (\$13 900) and adopting an HIV-positive children costs least (\$8500) – despite little difference in legal and administrative fees. Such ‘baby valuing’ is in fact ubiquitous in adoption practice (Goodwin, 2010).

States also actively contribute to creating a supply of orphans. Government officials often collude with adoption agencies to provide supply, from the local to the national level. One Ethiopian birth parent told Sarah Brittingham during her relinquishment study:

The *kebele* [local government administrator] looks for destitute people and informs them that there is an agency and they can send the children abroad. They come to your home and ask if you want to send your child away, that they will have a better life .... The institution and the agency that is working in the area have contact with the *kebele* and work as partners searching for parents who can’t raise their children, they give them a good picture of the child being raised in a foreign country with a good family, and the family feels pressure. This is how it was for me. (Brittingham, 2010, p. 34)

In Africa, where there is a strong ethos of extended-family care for orphans including fostering and sponsorship, birth parents’ consent to relinquishment also tends to stem from a lack of

**Table 2:** US agency Dove Adoptions International, Inc.’s fee schedule for Ethiopia, 2009. Additional non-agency costs were estimated at \$6750–15 630 per adoption

Type of fee	Child 0–5 years	Child 6–14 years	Special needs child (non-HIV+)	HIV+ child
Orphanage services	\$4650	\$2500	\$2000	\$1000
Foreign office and legal services	\$2675	\$2675	\$2675	\$2675
AIDS relief and humanitarian services	\$1400	\$1400	\$1400	\$1400
Agency services	\$5175	\$3425	\$3425	\$3425
Total fees	\$13 900	\$10 000	\$9500	\$8500

understanding of adoption as having permanent legal implications. It is for these reasons that organizations like the ACPF (2012a) are concerned about Africa becoming the ‘new frontier’ in ICA: ‘... the meaningful recognition (or lack thereof) of the extended family in Africa has implications for the meaning of adoptability, consent to adoption, the nature of adoption (open or closed), cultural heritage, etc’ (p. 3). This practice is not unique to Africa, however: in rural Nepal, unwitting parents even *paid* local officials to take their children to urban boarding schools but had little recourse when they discovered that their children had actually been sold to an orphanage and adopted abroad, because the person to whom they would lodge a complaint was the very person who had sold their children (Terre des Hommes and UNICEF, 2010). Though many countries are suspicious of international standards, ‘typically because they represent the views of former colonizers’, Roby and Ife (2009) point out, in order to avoid abuses, ‘it often becomes necessary to rely on these standards in arenas where no other standards have been established’ (pp. 665–666). One international standard is the Hague Convention on ICA.

### **The Hague Convention**

The 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (HCIA) was established in concert with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (HCCH, 1993). The 2012 HCIA information brochure states that ‘While making the rights and interests of the child paramount, it also respects and protects the rights of families of origin and adoptive families’ (HCCH, 2012a, p. 5). It calls for rights-based oversight of the ICA industry, establishes a central authority in each member state and enacts a subsidiarity principle in which ICA is the last resort for permanent family care after domestic options have been exhausted. To date, 90 countries have become signatories.

While the Convention encourages co-responsibility between states’ parties, sending countries are primarily responsible for implementation – often with inadequate resources. Signatory countries are also encouraged but not required to adopt from other signatory countries, thus allowing for the utilization of inequality to facilitate the international transfer of children. Though ICA proponents have claimed that the HCIA had closed ICA opportunities for needy children (Bartholet, 2010, p. 95), ICAs have more than doubled in the last 20 years, peaking in 2004 at over 45 000 (Selman, 2009). Table 3 shows that only 5 of the top 10 countries of origin have acceded to the Convention, leaving about 78 per cent of ICAs loosely or unregulated and gravitating toward countries that allow for ICA with little oversight. In Africa, where only 13 of 55 countries and just 4 (South Africa, Madagascar, Mali and Burkina Faso) of Africa’s top 10 sending countries have ratified the HCIA, ICAs have tripled since 2004 (ACPF, 2012a, pp. 11–12). The fact that ICA trends toward relatively poor countries with less regulation clearly indicates the marketization of the industry where intermediaries profit by the manufacture of orphans (Freundlich, 2000; Kapstein, 2003; Goodwin, 2010; Roby *et al*, 2013, pp. 5–6).

### **Social Reproduction and the Commodification of Children**

As noted above, political economic analyses until recently have failed to adequately consider social reproduction through such institutions as the family, which economists considered divorced from the instrumentality of labor markets (Dickinson and Russell, 1986, p. 3). But the enduring consideration of the family as a normative, extra-economic institution is ironically what has allowed children themselves to become commodified in the international economy through ICA.

**Table 3:** Top 10 sending countries 2003–2011. ICAs covered by the Hague Convention shaded (Selman, 2013a and [www.hcch.net/index\\_en.php?act=conventions.status&cid=69](http://www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=conventions.status&cid=69))

Country	2003–2011	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	HCIA-regulated ICAs
China	79 577	11 226	13 409	14 493	10 744	8 748	5 975	5 084	5 480	4 418	29 705
Russia	51 142	7 743	9 379	7 480	6 765	4 880	4 140	4 033	3 395	3 327	0
Ethiopia	25 708	858	1 527	1 778	2 172	3 033	3 905	4 564	4 404	3 456	0
Guatemala	24 138	2 676	3 424	3 872	4 232	4 851	4 186	799	58	40	5 083
South Korea	14 653	2 308	2 241	2 121	1 815	1 223	1 392	1 438	1 153	961	0
Colombia	14 631	1 750	1 734	1 466	1 639	1 635	1 617	1 415	1 798	1 577	14 631
Ukraine	13 984	2 052	2 019	1 987	1 046	1 614	1 577	1 517	1 094	1 073	0
Vietnam	10 927	936	488	1 198	1 370	1 695	1 739	1 518	1 279	704	0
Haiti	10 457	1 056	1 159	958	1 096	783	1 368	1 241	2 601	195	0
India	7 708	1 173	1 083	873	847	1 003	759	727	615	628	6 535
Kazakhstan	6 145	863	888	843	714	779	732	659	518	149	149
Philippines	4 591	418	414	503	476	569	600	583	516	509	4 588
Brazil	4 106	472	478	473	518	485	490	462	380	348	4 106
Thailand	3 613	490	501	465	419	440	384	339	314	261	2 622
Poland	3 371	347	406	409	395	381	408	402	325	298	3 371
Total sent from top 10 countries	324 641	41 535	45 299	43 710	39 460	37 249	34 785	29 867	29 127	23 609	70 790 22%

Landes and Posner’s (1978) article ‘The Economics of the Baby Shortage’ was the first to propose a market analysis for evaluating the efficiency of adoption processes, but it met with unanticipated, vehement pushback from critics who refused to accept the very existence of an adoption ‘market’, with twentieth-century ideals of children as ‘priceless’ having rendered any fiscal consideration of adoption abhorrent (Zelizer, 2010, p. 272). However, Goodwin (2010) points out that ‘Refusal then and now to acknowledge financial incentives in adoption does not negate the free market’s existence and influence in adoption services’ – it only allows the adoption industry to continue to function largely unchecked (p. 4). Even the HCIA fails to account for ‘baby valuing’: the differential costs of adopting more or less ‘desirable’ children.

Neoliberal economic policies and their attendant crises of social reproduction accommodate the masked commodification of children in ICA. Some argue that ICA can and should be seen as a form of development cooperation: outspoken proponent Bartholet (2010, p. 101) writes that ICA spares sending countries the heavy financial burden of supporting children in institutions. However, this is exactly the problem according to critics of neoliberalism: that states are relieved not only of population pressures through ICA but also of their duties to citizens by their exodus. Framings of ICA as relief of economic burden thus fit with neoliberal development prescriptions by situating responsibility for social reproduction away from the welfare state and onto families (Dickens, 2009, p. 596). Amid the consequent falling birth rates, the state provides adoption incentives such as tax breaks to aspiring middle-class parents. As adoption becomes a more widely accepted alternative to biological reproduction among Western middle- and upper-class families, states that allow adoption of poor children effectively privatize childcare by transferring a child internationally to a new home. Framing the practice as charitable, modern family-making simultaneously erases the inequalities that make such a transaction possible.

## Rethinking ICA in Humanitarianism and Development

ICA is ideally about finding families for children who need them, but due to its marketization in an unequal world, in practice ICA is skewed toward finding children for families who want them. Yet, sentimentalization of children masks the market exchange as apolitical humanitarianism. While the view of ICA as child rescue or ‘saving’ is being questioned across the EU, this humanitarian discourse still dominates in the largest receiving country, the United States (Saunders, 2007, p. 4), and continues to carry religious connotations in a renewed evangelical push for ICA (Joyce, 2013).

In the ethos of international humanitarianism, the impulse to want to ‘save’ children is also figured in public discourse as selfless and charitable. In the context of adoption, Zelizer (2010) notes that ‘... the value of a priceless child became increasingly monetized and commercialized. Ironically, the new market price for babies was set exclusively by their noneconomic, sentimental appeal’ (p. 272). However, once adoption involves economic exchange, the humanitarian intentions that motivate adoption are inevitably marketized (Bornstein, 2012, p. 111).

Yet the sentimentalization of children can produce easy ‘victims’ of developmental deficits (Fassin, 2007; Bornstein and Redfield, 2010), and thus targets for intervention. This same presumption is coopted by ICA proponents to justify adoptions of children who are not necessarily parentless but are impoverished: UNICEF has taken a very broad definition of an ‘orphan’ as any child under 15 years of age who has had at least one parent die, yielding a staggering figure of 132 million orphans across the global South ([www.unicef.org/media/media\\_45279.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_45279.html)). While taking a broad definition was meant to encompass a wide range of

vulnerable children in need of development interventions (Cheney, 2010), ICA proponents have latched onto these figures to argue that opening to ICA is a humanitarian imperative (Bartholet and Smolin, 2012, p. 233). However, UNICEF has also taken the position, in accordance with the HCIA, that local family-based care solutions should be prioritized over ICA ([www.unicef.org/media/media\\_41118.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_41118.html)) – thus differentiating importantly between children who are ‘orphans’ and children who are ‘adoptable’, particularly across international borders.

Most orphans, especially in Africa, are in extended family care, and the majority of those in institutions have traceable, living relatives (Phiri and Tolfree, 2005, p. 13). While still allowing that ‘for *individual* children who cannot be placed in a permanent family setting in their countries of origin, it *may* indeed be the best solution’ (UNICEF, n.d., ([www.unicef.org/media/media\\_41118.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_41118.html)) emphasis added), many NGOs will point out that from a policy standpoint, ICA is the least efficient means of alleviating orphanhood. The establishment of institutions (at one time seen as a ‘modern’ solution to child welfare) has only ‘created’ orphans in impoverished communities while producing ‘poor results for small numbers at high cost per child’ (Phiri and Tolfree, 2005, p. 13). The money spent to adopt a child internationally is thus unjustifiably higher than the assistance necessary for relinquishing birth families in the global South to be able to keep their children. Even modest income assistance has proven to be transformative of struggling households (The Joint Learning Initiative on Children and HIV/AIDS, 2009, p. 6). Most international development institutions and NGOs therefore favor local, community-based solutions for orphanhood and family preservation over ICA, but since this approach does not yield ‘adoptable’ children, most international adoption agencies tend not to work with them (Smolin, 2007, p. 450). Given that ‘... intercountry adoption involves a linkage between developing nations and rich nations ...’, Smolin (2007) argues that ‘spending \$30 000 on an intercountry adoption makes it incongruous to state that \$300 in assistance to keep the child with their birth family was not available’. It also means that the children who are adopted internationally are often *not* the most vulnerable.

### ICA as Modern Family Formation: ‘Progress’ and Development

‘Modern adoption is premised on inequality ...’ – Dubinsky (2010, p. 9)

Because of the ideological significance of a nation’s children to its future (Cheney, 2007; Dubinsky 2012), ICA debates are polarized. The symbolism of children for a nation’s future is globalized in ICA as transnational adoptees become symptomatic embodiments of both receiving countries’ social and economic ‘progress’ and sending nations’ failures to ‘take care of their own’ (Dubinsky, 2010). ICAs thus play into development trajectories of ‘modern’ families and nations.

There are several respects in which ICA is symptomatic of modernity and social progress – notions that underpin development. Despite falling birth rates and delayed childbirth by women entering the labor market in North America and Europe, the maintenance of the hetero-normative family remains a linchpin of neoliberal moral logics of reproduction (Duggan *et al.*, 2013). ICA has thus become a viably ‘modern’ (and similarly commodified) family formation technique, along the lines of various assisted reproductive technologies and surrogacy, which have also gone global (Marre and Briggs, 2009; Goodwin, 2010). Often, these too are premised on inequality, where it is assumed that people in need of income can and should service the reproductive needs of wealthier people (Schachter, 2011). This is justified by the incontestable prioritization of children’s ‘best interests’ and posited as a ‘win’ for everyone that fulfills humanitarian imperatives on a micro-scale, ‘saving’ one child at a time.

Bornstein and Redfield (2010) write that ‘In temporal terms, development discourse is inherently and resolutely progressive; conditions *should* improve, with the promise of an open

and potentially infinite future’ (p. 5). This is especially true for young people, who stand to inherit that future, as indicated by international organizations’ publications such as UNICEF’s 2002 ‘A World Fit for Children’ plan of action or the World Bank’s 2007 World Development Report, ‘Development and the Next Generation’. Global child rescue discourses are enmeshed in the creation of charitable organizations with names like ‘Save the Children’. As private, individualized charity becomes central to neoliberal responses to poverty (Cheng *et al*, 2013), ICA emerges as a natural extension of programs that encourage individual sponsorship of poor children abroad, especially where it coincides with an upper middle-class sense of entitlement to family. Because the Western privileging of family as an institution with children at its center is ironically rooted at least in part in neoliberal consumption patterns, material considerations are often at the heart of ‘better life’, child rescue discourses: removing children from poverty is always justified. ICA proponents have invoked such arguments in opposition to the HCIA, and particularly the subsidiarity principle. Proponents have labeled UNICEF ‘anti-adoption’ for their support of HCIA-regulated adoption only as a last resort before institutionalization (Siegal, 2011, p. 76), framing the denial of the possibility of ICA as a violation of children’s rights.

Yet implicit in this construction is a class-based model of appropriate and ‘deserving’ parenthood that reinforces middle-class entitlement while pathologizing poor parents – just as in nineteenth-century United Kingdom or America but now on a global scale. The retreat of the state simultaneously strains poor households through deepening income inequality and then questions struggling parents’ fitness to raise their own children. Leshkovich (2012) has argued that neoliberal policies in Vietnam render social reproduction questions technical, setting moral standards of appropriate parenthood that ‘... explain rising adoption rates as due to the desperation, ignorance, or emotional inadequacies of poor, rural single mothers who abandon their children’ (p. 497). Despite persistent stereotypes of unwed mothers abandoning children, however, Bos’ (2008, pp. 25–26) study revealed that most Indian children were actually relinquished by married couples who for broad societal reasons felt that daughters in particular were insurmountable burdens on their limited resources.

ICA proponents’ opposition to the HCIA’s subsidiarity principle is based on a ‘better-life’ discourse that prioritizes ICA over preservation of the family, the rights of birth parents and children’s rights to a name, family, nationality and culture (ACPF, 2012b). Such a tendency renders, as Noonan (2007) has put it, entire countries, unsuitable for children’ (p. 314); for example, media representations of vulnerable children in the wake of Haiti’s 2010 earthquake prompted a flood of emails by adoptive parents wanting to ‘save’ Haiti’s children, thereby ‘... enabl[ing] a critique of the Haitian culture and nation itself as fundamentally flawed and in need of saving through the interventions of the international order ...’ (Hoffman, 2012, p. 155), ICA chief among them.

Relinquishing families in developing countries may indeed acquiesce to financial strains and adoption brokers’ inducements, but this can often be in hopes of deploying adoptees as agents of the entire family’s social mobility, particularly because their migration to richer countries as ‘innocent children’ and desirable adoptees is much less complicated than adults’ migration from the same country (Fass, 2007, p. 13). Children can even internalize ‘better life’ narratives. For example, a child in Brittingham’s (2010) Ethiopian study told her parents, ‘It’s better if we go outside [the country], and when we have something of our own we will help you’ (p. 35). But this notion can reflect birth families’ ignorance of the permanence of relinquishment and the detachment that may mean that the promise of reciprocity never comes to fruition. In fact, because the HCIA prohibition of ‘improper financial gain’ is often interpreted in international law as money to birth families (but *not* necessarily adoption intermediaries), families who relinquish children due to poverty usually remain in poverty even after relinquishing children (Smolin, 2007).

Many adoptive parents tend to think of adoption as a form of social mobility for their adopted children. As Stryker's (2010, pp. 36–37) interviews with American adoptive parents revealed:

... parents understand the child's movement toward more material and emotional attention as innately progressive for them, unequivocally signaling a positive advancement in their life situation ... what they offered their adopted children was salvation from disadvantaged backgrounds, whether by providing upward social mobility, by upgrading their national citizenship, or by helping them escape from a lower-class status. Parents also assumed that, with their help, children would be escaping from an emotionally impoverished environment, and many times, a dangerous environment.

Family formation through ICA thus becomes a developmental action.

Political-economic analyses of the commodification of bodies (what Karl Polanyi, 1957 [1944] calls 'fictitious commodities') place predominantly female internationally adopted children (girls account for nearly 2/3 of ICAs ([www.thelaboroflove.com/articles/child-adoption-statistics-around-the-world](http://www.thelaboroflove.com/articles/child-adoption-statistics-around-the-world))) in a continuum of 'affective economies' of women doing transnational emotional labor, from nannies and au pairs to sex workers and mail-order brides. Eng (2006) considers how such adoptees' 'labor of passion' helps shore up the white middle-class family – and even in some cases, the multicultural nation (Dubinsky, 2010; Yngvesson, 2010, p. 94). These complexities are tied up in a global system of child circulation in which ICA figures as a sort of Manifest Destiny of individualized social reproduction and family formation.<sup>4</sup> As one adoption agency advertisement reads above a portrait of a baby, 'She'll be your Whole World. Will you go Halfway Around It to find her?' ([www.coloribus.com/adsarchive/prints/adoption-services-around-the-world-1275155/](http://www.coloribus.com/adsarchive/prints/adoption-services-around-the-world-1275155/)).

In return, international adoptees are sometimes expected to be grateful for the adoptive parents' sacrifice that 'saved' them from a life of misery in their birth community. As Stryker (2010) notes, '... [parents] expected children to perform as emotional assets who would provide child love to make families "real" through narrative, ritual, and practice' (p. 43). Therefore, while adoption is ostensibly initiated to 'save' them, adopted children may actually serve as vital forms of social capital that end up 'saving' the adoptive family by performing the emotional labor necessary for social reproduction.<sup>5</sup> This begs the question of who is really giving what to whom in adoption.

### **The HCIA and Development Aid**

The HCIA stipulates that development aid negotiations between countries should have no relationship to ICA (HCCH, 1993). However, laws that are easy to put down on paper can be much more difficult to implement in practice. Development aid in exchange for ICA children became so prevalent in Vietnam, for example, that the government drafted its own national law stating explicitly that humanitarian aid should be completely separate from ICA (International Social Service, 2009). Due to concerns over improper financial gain, a heated debate over the relationship of ICA and development aid ensued at the HCIA 2010 Special Commission.<sup>6</sup> Receiving-country Central Authorities complained that if they did not provide development aid, the sending country would deny their adoption applications, or they would receive lower priority than applicants from countries that offered aid (HCCH, 2012b, p. 73). On the other hand, countries of origin complained that their accession to the HCIA has slowed the influx of aid because of separation rules. Some argued that the HCIA should allow them to receive 'contributions' as long as they do not influence adoption decisions, while others found this proposition completely untenable. ICA funds were sometimes the sole funding source for certain country-of-origin child welfare institutions. Ethiopia, for example (which is *not* party to the HCIA), mandated a per-adoption 'AIDS Relief & Humanitarian Services' fee from adoption

agencies wishing to do business there (see Table 2), most of which ostensibly goes to child welfare programs. ICA has thus gone from short-term emergency aid relief to long-term poverty alleviation strategy, creating a dependency on ICA to fund child protection systems. A report by the Joint Council on International Child Services, an umbrella organization for ICA agencies, tallied \$14 million in mandatory adoption contributions to Ethiopia in 2010 alone (Bartholet and Smolin, 2012). Where so much money is coming into a poor country like Ethiopia through ICA, becoming party to the HCIA can mean changing the *status quo*, which will not be seen as politically expedient by policymakers. There is thus little desire or motivation to submit to regulation.

In any case, a country must have some pre-existing child welfare system in order to accede to the Convention (HCCH, 2012b, p. 98), and thus there is little chance that the weakest states will be in a position to conform to the HCIA. In such a ‘free’ adoption market, ‘when intercountry adoption is demand-driven and financial incentives are offered, adoptability may not be properly investigated and subsidiarity is not properly applied’ (HCCH, 2012b, p. 93).

### **Incorporating ICA into Development Trajectories**

Various countries of origin have found ways to incorporate (and reincorporate) ICA and internationally adopted children into development priorities, such as using it to build child welfare systems. A nation’s aspirations for ICA more broadly may be disappointed; as noted above, countries have closed to international adoption as intolerable abuses and irregularities are exposed. However, the gradual decline of ICA in a sending country may also indicate social and economic progress: as the crises of social reproduction that precipitated an opening to ICA are resolved, the numbers of children they send abroad can subside (as in China), sometimes also by successfully encouraging more domestic adoption (as in South Korea and India).

When states close to ICA, they may still draw on these transnational ties to boost local economies. States have used ICA not only as a way of relieving the economic burden of childcare on the state, as shown above, but to generate revenue through, for example, adoptee return tourism. Families with adoptive Chinese children as young as 6 years of age are encouraged to bring them (the whole family, in fact, to solidify adoption kinship through experiential bonds) back to China on heritage tours that include stops at the orphanage from which the child was adopted, along with major area tourist attractions. Many of these tours also donate 1–2 per cent of the tour cost to the orphanages to maintain the impression of charity (Dorow, 2010, p. 78). On rare occasions, adoptive parents also create ongoing development and assistance projects in their children’s home countries as a way for their children to reconnect with their home villages and birth families, even as they inject resources into the local economy – fulfilling individual birth families’ expectations of reciprocation. The subsequent ‘culture-keeping’ (Jacobson, 2008) necessary to maintenance the transnational family also becomes commercialized, catalyzing cultural markets that keep internationally adopted children ‘in touch’ with their birth culture both by normalizing consumption as an identity-making practice and producing social relations among adopted kin (Dorow, 2010, p. 79).

ICA thus has a generational dimension, not only offering infants to adoptive parents but also providing participatory development opportunities to adult adoptees. Kim (2005) describes how the South Korean government stages elaborate ritual ceremonies to reincorporate adult Korean adoptees into a globalized Korean family. This action also repositions the narrative of Korean adoptions from one of national shame and ‘a painful symbol of national backwardness’ (Dubinsky, 2010, p. 18) to ICA as a ‘success story’ crucial to the construction of a modern, capitalist South Korea. By calling on adult adoptees to use their ‘advantage’ of having grown up

in the prosperous United States (where Koreans are often framed as a ‘model minority’) to benefit their birth country through investment in Korean economic growth, the state re-appropriates Korean international adoptees for the nation’s social reproduction.

It is through these erasures and re-scriptings of adoptees’ experiences that ICA becomes imbricated in developing nations’ aspirations to First World status (Dubinsky, 2010, p. 18). It also figures the international adoptee as solver of generational problems of social reproduction, first for the adoptive family and nation by having immigrated as a child, and then for the country of origin by returning as an adult. Often, however, ICA contributes to subsequent crises of social reproduction, as in China and India, where so many ‘missing’ women and girls drastically skew the current sex ratio.<sup>7</sup>

## **The Circulation of Children in the Unequal World**

Neoliberal development prescriptions dictate that countries should liberalize their economies and open up new export markets. Because both social reproduction-driven demand for children in the West and adoption brokers in developing countries conflate the alleviation of crises of social reproduction with lucrative opportunities afforded by ICA, supply chains of manufactured ‘orphans’ through ‘child laundering’ (Smolin, 2010) have become a telltale marker of ICA’s shifting frontier. Yet the prevalent notion of ICA as a humanitarian act of child rescue continues to mask the market dynamics that drive demand for ICA amid an otherwise dwindling supply. Despite valiant efforts by the HCIA, ICA remains a market practice that resists regulation and perpetuates global inequality through the circulation of children. While it is an ambitious convention, it ultimately fails to regulate the ICA industry because demand has the upper hand.

Though ICA can in certain circumstances ‘give children a better life’, it is vital to question underlying assumptions and practices justified by such a claim. As I have shown, ICA’s global system of child circulation rests on an unequal exchange that solves certain crises of social reproduction (in receiving as much as sending countries) while creating new ones. While ICA is appropriate for children for whom no local solutions can offer a permanent family, the current market-driven industry perpetuates a system that treats children as reified symptoms of structural inequalities (for example, ‘orphans’) rather than dealing with the root causes of poverty and inequality that precipitate orphanhood – ultimately exacerbating North/South economic divides. A political economy of ICA that takes children as central figures in social reproduction thus complicates such humanitarian discourses of child rescue by seeing orphans not only as victims in need of rescue (sometimes from their own families, communities and nations) but as laborers in the affective economy of modern family-making. Similarly, taking a generational approach to development reminds us that children do not stand apart from family, nation or international development concerns; they are integral players in a web of local and global social relations. A critical examination of ICA thus draws our attention to the ways children figure in these relations and prompts us to more holistically rethink questions of social reproduction, international humanitarianism and the geopolitics of children’s ‘best interests’ in more inclusive, intergenerational terms.

## **Notes**

1. I use the terms global North/South interchangeably with developed/developing countries.
2. Unpublished figures courtesy of Peter Selman.

3. Ugandan adoption law requires a 3-year residency period. However, increasing numbers of foreign adoptive parents have discovered a loophole in guardianship laws, enabling them to remove children from Uganda. They then apply for permanent adoption once they reach their home country. This has led to a tripling of ICAs in the past few years ([edition.cnn.com/2013/02/27/world/africa/wus-uganda-adoptions](http://edition.cnn.com/2013/02/27/world/africa/wus-uganda-adoptions)).
4. Manifest Destiny refers to the expansionist period in nineteenth-century America, wherein American settlers thought it their destiny to claim all the territory from coast to coast and remake it in their virtuous self-image.
5. International adoptees report feeling this pressure while reconciling the 'good fortune' of their adoption with their abandonment by and loss of connection with biological family and native culture. Cf. Knowlton, Linda G. 2012. *Somewhere Between*, the United States.
6. Personal communication from various delegates in attendance, who wish to remain anonymous.
7. China's One-Child Policy spurred ICA, along with selective abortion and infanticide of girls. China's boy-girl ratio is consequently one of the most imbalanced in the world ([populationmatters.org/2012/newswatch/china-boygirl-ratio-improves-worlds-worst/](http://populationmatters.org/2012/newswatch/china-boygirl-ratio-improves-worlds-worst/)). Cultural factors similarly influence India's uneven sex ratio. Cf. Srinivasan (this volume) and 'India's 60 million women that never were' ([www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/07/201372814110570679.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/07/201372814110570679.html)).

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